

Character Class

Sturdy Brawlers

Weapons and Fighting Styles

By Skip Williams



When last we met, we considered races for fighting characters. Once you've chosen a race to go along with your martial class, it's time to think about your gear, starting with your weapons.

Weapons and Fighting Styles

If you've chosen a martial class, you probably have proficiency with all simple and martial weapons, which gives you more than two dozen melee weapons from which to choose. The Exotic Weapon Proficiency feat opens up even more options. Despite the vast array of weaponry available to you, chances are you'll use only a handful of weapons during your adventuring career, and you'll likely choose them fairly early. You're certainly free to change your weapons whenever you like, but once you've spent cash on a magical weapon and devoted a feat or two for combat improvements (usually Exotic Weapon Proficiency, Weapon Focus, or both), switching your weapon can prove painful. It pays to choose a weapon you can live with for a while.

When choosing a collection of weapons to use, keep it small. All you need is a primary melee weapon, which you'll use in most battles, a ranged weapon for reaching foes you can't otherwise attack, and one or two backup weapons.

Your Primary Melee Weapon

When choosing a primary melee weapon, consider how you'll fight. Your choices boil down to three options -- one-handed weapon and shield, two weapons, or two-handed weapon. Each has advantages and drawbacks.

The **One-handed Weapon and Shield** option allows you the best Armor Class (thanks to the shield) while still allowing you to deal decent damage. A martial weapon such as a long sword or battleaxe is a good choice for this option because one-handed martial weapons tend to deal more damage or have better critical characteristics (or both) than one-handed simple weapons.

If you have a feat to spare, a one-handed exotic weapon such as a bastard sword or dwarven waraxe can improve the damage you expect to deal. This option works well for humans (who have a bonus racial feat) or dwarves (who can treat dwarven waraxes as martial weapons).



When you've chosen the one-handed weapon and shield style, it usually doesn't pay to skimp on the shield (read on). Carry a heavy wooden or steel shield (exactly which type depends on your personal taste), or spend a feat on tower shield proficiency (if your class doesn't provide it). If you choose a tower shield, remember that you suffer a -2 penalty on attack rolls while using it (see the tower shield description in Chapter 7 in the *Player's Handbook*). If you plan to use skills that are subject to armor check penalties, such as Jump or Balance, it might prove worthwhile to scale down your shield. In that case, go for a buckler or a light shield. Both have lower armor check penalties than heavy or tower shields. A masterwork buckler has no armor check penalty at all. A buckler offers just as much protection as a light shield, but you can't use it to bash foes, which you might find yourself doing if a foe disarms you.

The **Two Weapons** option hurts your Armor Class (because you usually use no shield), but it looks flashy, and it allows you to make an extra attack (or attacks) whenever you can use the full attack action. Fighting well with two weapons requires some planning and a fairly big investment in weapons and feats, as we shall see. Although you can make more attacks with this style, you'll tend to deal less damage with each hit, especially with your off-hand weapon -- it gets only half your Strength bonus on damage rolls (rounded down).

Choosing weapons for two-handed fighting isn't a simple matter. You'll need two primary melee weapons (one for each hand) or a double weapon. Your two-weapon fighting penalties will be lower if the weapon you use in your off hand is light (see page 160 in the *Player's Handbook*). A natural choice is a one-handed martial weapon for your primary hand and a light martial weapon for your off hand -- a long sword and a short sword, for example. Keep in mind, however, that feats such as Weapon Focus and Improved Critical apply to only one kind of weapon. If you choose one of these feats (and most



martial characters eventually choose at least one of them), you're better off using the same weapon in each hand.

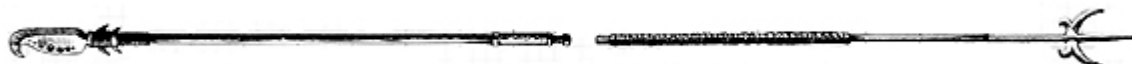
If you want the benefit of a light weapon in your off hand, use the same light weapon in each hand, such as two short swords. Using a light weapon in each hand is a great way to get the maximum benefit from the Weapon Finesse feat and is an excellent option for a martial character who has more Dexterity than Strength (such as a halfling, gnome, or elf).

Using a double weapon is worth considering if you're serious about two-weapon fighting. If you use both ends of a double weapon, you fight exactly as you would if you were using a one-handed weapon in your primary hand and a light weapon in your off hand. Any feats that affect your weapons also apply to both ends of the double weapon. Unfortunately, the most effective double weapons are exotic weapons that require you to use a feat to gain proficiency. For more information on two-handed fighting and double weapons, see Rules of the Game: All About Two-Handed Fighting [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), and [Part 3](#).

No matter which weapons you choose, you'll also want to take the Two-Weapon Fighting feat and probably a few of its relatives as you gain more levels. The Two-Weapon Defense feat can help offset the Armor Class reduction you suffer for lack of a shield. You also can use a light or heavy shield (with or without a shield spike) as your second weapon. A light shield counts as a light weapon. When you use your shield as a weapon, you lose the shield's bonus to your Armor Class until your next turn, but at least you have the shield to protect you when you aren't attacking with your shield hand. You can use a buckler in a similar way. You can't bash with a buckler, but you can wield a weapon in the same hand that's holding the buckler. There's a -1 attack penalty for attacks with the buckler hand, and you lose the buckler's Armor Class benefit until your next turn.

If you have a high Strength score -- and most martial characters have Strength in abundance -- a **Two-Handed Weapon** allows you to make the most of that Strength, at least when you're dealing damage. You receive 1.5 times your Strength bonus to damage with a two-handed weapon (page 113 in the *Player's Handbook*). On the downside, your Armor Class suffers from lack of a shield.

Two-handed martial weapons such as greatswords or greataxes are excellent choices for this fighting style. The exotic spiked chain is a two-handed weapon that deals less damage than a greatsword or greataxe, but it extends your reach, and you also can use it against foes that are adjacent to you (unlike other reach weapons). A martial, two-handed reach weapon such as a glaive can prove effective for you, but you'll need a backup weapon for attacking adjacent foes.



Fighting with a two-handed weapon doesn't require many feats. Weapon Focus with your chosen weapon is a good idea -- most martial characters choose that feat anyway. Power Attack is a no-brainer for you. When you add a damage bonus from the Power Attack feat with a two-handed weapon, the bonus doubles (see the feat description).

You don't have many options for improving your Armor Class when using a two-handed weapon. You can wear a buckler strapped to your arm while using a two-handed weapon, but it imposes a -1 penalty on your attack rolls. As noted in the section on fighting with two weapons, you also lose the buckler's defensive benefits until your next turn when you attack with the arm that carries the buckler (and attacking with a two-handed weapon counts). If you have the cash, an animated shield can help with your Armor Class. Animated shields also work when you're wielding two weapons, but the shield bonus from an animated shield doesn't stack with the shield bonus from the Two-Weapon Defense feat.

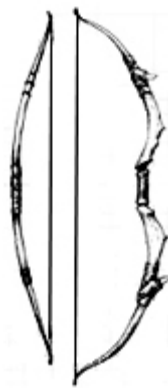
Backup and Ranged Weaponry

Once you've chosen the melee weapon (or weapons) you'll use most often, consider a backup melee weapon or two. Having an extra weapon can be a lifesaver for you and your group should a foe disarm you or you lose your primary melee weapon some other way. It's much easier and safer to draw a new weapon than to stoop down and pick up something you've dropped, especially when an enemy threatens you.

Characters With Class has noted before that it's a good idea to choose a backup weapon that deals a different sort of damage from your primary weapon. For example, if you normally use a bastard sword (a slashing weapon), choose a warhammer (bludgeoning) or a morningstar (bludgeoning and piercing) as a backup. This approach is helpful when you must deal with a foe that has damage reduction your primary weapon can't overcome.

It's also useful to keep one or two light melee weapons on your person for fighting in tight spots. Weapons you can throw, such as hand axes or daggers, are particularly useful when an opponent is just out of reach. A light slashing weapon also is handy when a big monster swallows you whole.

For long-ranged combat, choose a martial ranged weapon. It's hard to beat a composite longbow for range and damage potential. A composite bow costs more, but it lets you take advantage of your Strength bonus to damage, which is a great advantage (see page 119 in the *Player's Handbook*). Best of all, a bow (as opposed to a crossbow) doesn't require an action to reload, so you can make multiple attacks with it each round if your base attack bonus allows.



Your Weapon Budget

Weapons are important to any fighting character, but don't go overboard. You'll need some armor and other gear to have a successful adventuring career. As a rule of thumb, be ready to have at least 25% of your wealth invested in weaponry at any given time, but no more than 50%. When in doubt, add up the costs of all your current equipment and add in your current cash. Do not count any non-portable assets you might have, such as buildings or land. Whenever you find that your total weaponry cost represents less than 25% of what you're carrying around (or could carry around), it's time to purchase a new weapon or upgrade a current one. For example, you could trade in a masterwork weapon for a magical version, or pay someone to give the weapon an enhancement bonus. Likewise, if you're thinking about buying a new weapon or an upgrade for an old one, you should rethink the purchase if doing so will leave you with more than 50% of your assets invested in weapons.

One quick way to judge how powerful your weaponry should be is to glance at the example NPCs from Chapter 4 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Player characters usually have more wealth than NPCs, so if you're falling short of what's shown for an NPC that's similar to your character, consider it a wake-up call. For example, a 3rd level NPC fighter owns a +1 melee weapon and a masterwork ranged weapon, so your 3rd-level martial character probably should be doing at least that well.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.